

# ART RECESS 2

## POETRY AND MORE

### Intimations of Immortality: Odes, Elegies, and Politics

The critical fallacy inheres in discussions of English Romanticism that Keats is the least political of the major Romantic poets. Ostensibly, Keats' subject matter is not directly political: the odal cycle or vision (and *Hyperion* in addition) addresses subjectivity, temporality and spatiality, history (classical antiquity), epistemology, and the poet's relationship to tactility, especially in the form of natural objects/vistas and expressed hetero sexuality. Yet, specifically in *Ode to a Nightingale*, a reckoning is enacted which takes Keats straight to the heart of a political dilemma which has plagued mankind since classical antiquity and before: what is the place of extremely developed and expressed individuality, visionary individuality, as it were, in an individual, against the conformist masses, held under the protective aegis of conformist societal contexts? Adorno's *Lyric Poetry and Society* initiates many pertinent inquiries on this level. How I would like to elevate the discourse to the next plateau is to up a certain kind of discursive ante by tackling a trope which has lost some status over the last few hundred years, especially in the textual morasses created by, and around, post-structuralism: immortality. Specifically, as a topos to investigate in poetic texts and other literary contexts: who is more immortal, the visionary, with his or her extremely developed interiority, set in place against societal norms, or any generalized normative; and the ethos and praxis of the conformist masses themselves, with their standards of regulated behavior and (more importantly) regulated cognition. These issues present themselves nose on the face in the penultimate stanza of *Nightingale*:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
The same that oft-times hath  
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

Nightingale puts Keats' entire visionary odal system on a tightrope, as he boldly confronts its potential obsolescence. What makes the nightingale immortal, here, is its sense of being indistinguishable from all other nightingales, whether singing for Ruth or not. Those not touched by the stigma of extreme individuality (here of a visionary nature) have their safety and immortality in numbers; while an "I" developed to an absolute peak of sharp cognitive-affective incisiveness is so vulnerable, through its singularity into isolation, that it can only feel the pangs of mortality and impending death beating behind and in front of it at all times. The politics of this dilemma is simple: any given society must decide for itself to what extent individuals may develop themselves as distinct, autonomous entities, against the normative, or to what extent this process must be nipped in the bud. The critical commonplace of the isolated Romantic genius does apply here, as does Adorno; but what is added is the sense of potential longevity in configuring things from one end of this to the other: who gets to be immortal, Keats or his replicant, replaceable Nightingale? This fits snugly into (also) an exploration of the Cheltenham Elegies. The analogue to Nightingale, 261, manifests in no uncertain terms the same syndromes and dichotomies:

Never one to cut corners about cutting  
corners, you spun the Subaru into a rough  
U-turn right in the middle of Old York Road  
at midnight, scaring the shit out of this self-  
declared "artist." The issue, as ever, was  
nothing particular to celebrate. We could  
only connect nothing with nothing in our  
private suburban waste land. Here's where  
the fun starts— I got out, motherfucker.  
I made it. I say "I," and it works. But Old  
York Road at midnight is still what it is.  
I still have to live there the same way you do.

The protagonist of the poem has the same sense of systematic, incisive insight as Keats does in the Odes. Here, the antagonist, who represents (among other things) the typical and the normative individual trapped in a society which values destructiveness and the continued predominance of crass, stunted lives, is not a Nightingale but the driver of the Subaru in question. For discursive sake, let's call him "Chris." Who Chris is, as an American archetype; the suburban daredevil or show-off, with the same blarneying sense of indestructibility, backed by the despair of immobile, low-minded interests; is meant to appear as immortal as the visionary poet, who laments in an elegiac way the pointlessness of the world as it exists for both characters. The problem here (or tightrope, over which the elegiac system must walk) is that, for those for whom high art consonance is anathema, Chris will always remain a more eternal character than the autonomous, visionary artist.

What, or who, is immortal here is a political issue; not just because the masses tend to propel the masses forward, and Chris is resolutely one of the masses, but because even the notion of

immortality-in-art (a fixation for both these Odes and Elegies) is a vulnerable one, before the mind-numbing force and obduracy of mass indifference and resentment (including the disdain of literary theory and theorists, post-structuralists, New Historicists and others). The Odes have been given a high place, over two hundred years, in the canon of English literature. The Cheltenham Elegies have only begun to have the life they are destined to have. Yet neither the Odes nor the Elegies are for the obdurate masses, who are (very much) eternally and immortally impervious to the siren call of advanced textuality. That high art is nonetheless a political force on high levels and for all time is also manifestly and demonstrably the case, no matter how eternally impervious the masses are. The artist must stand alone, with his or her visions, against the imperviousness of the masses; perhaps with a Romantic sense of sublimity, perhaps not; but the politics of Keats dictates that the politics of what endures, of what is meant to be immortal and what is not, of how far an individual may go to extend his or her individuality against the masses, is one which will remain a tightrope to be walked and a pertinent issue for as long as anyone wishes to create major high art consonant work.

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### Apparition Poems : Artist in Academia

What happens to a genuine artist forced to survive in academia? I entered Temple University with the University Fellowship in 2006. I already had a Penn degree and an MFA. What I noticed instantly about hardcore academia is that everyone had a way or manner of fronting heavily involved with jargon and “jargonese.” To keep up, in academic discourses, I had to learn all sorts of idiolects and dialect tricks. If you know the right jargon, in these situations (which ran the gamut, from seminars to Temple-sponsored poetry readings to everyday, office-bound interactions with peers), you can appear to be “in” the right way. By the time I wrote Apparition Poems in ‘09/’10, I was pissed off with the rigors of academia and academic fronts, and was, in fact, more than ready to take the piss, in App 1607:

Every live body has a dialect:  
to the extent that bodies are  
in the process of effacing both  
themselves, what they efface, I  
move past dialect to the extent  
that there are no no-brainers  
here, what’s moral in this is the  
belief that properly used dialects  
emanate waves to hold bodies  
in place. As to who’s saying this,  
I heard this on the street last  
night after a few drinks with  
an ex at Dirty Frank’s. It was  
a bum who meant it, it worked.

Temple English specialized in a certain form of academic feminism, where gauntlets were perpetually being laid down by ersatz powerhouses out to dazzle us with their gravitas. What I found charming about their rhetoric is the sense that they always demonstrate a moment of “getting real” or “being real” with the audiences for their presentations, articles, and books; thus, throwing in “there are no no-brainers/ here” has to do with the attempt to be imperiously earthy amongst all the verbiage, “in”

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references, other kinds of codes, and general aura of totalized pompous pretentiousness. I had to set the poem at Dirty Frank's, because to me all the blarney of academic feminism, its pretentiousness and faux-earthiness, belong in the gutter, and Dirty Frank's is as charming a dive-bar and a trough as any in Center City. In fact, Dirty Frank's was a major PFS hang-out in the mid-Aughts— located at 13th and Pine, caddy-corner to the Last Drop, and thus as easy access as it could possibly be, and a place where the booze was cheap and the ambience about “ease in sleaze,” down to the “Frank” mural painted around the bar's outside façade.

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### Apparition Poems : The Darkest Hour

Much of the book *Apparition Poems* was written in the middle of the night, between November 2009 and February 2010. That winter wasn't particularly an extreme one; and I established a regimen, in November, of going to bed early and waking up to write at around 3 am. I could do this because it was a Fellowship year for me at Temple, meaning I didn't have to teach. I had already passed the dread comp exams and was working on the prospectus for my dissertation. I was only on the Temple campus once every few weeks. So much of *Apparition Poems* was formed from this congeries of circumstances — waking at 3am in the dead of winter in a studio apartment at 23rd and Arch Street in Center City Philadelphia— that it seems apropos that darkness, and the middle of the night itself, be motifs in the book. Center City Philly in the middle of the night is not a conventionally attractive locale; more like a menacing one. Yet, I found in the urban darkness the cognitive enchantment of a kind of inverse grace, a force that transmuted the brutish into the beautiful, and made (in phenomenological terms) the outside the mind realities which informed the book's narrative-thematic levels compelling, magnetic to me. The darkness in *Apparition Poems* manifests both in the sex portrayed and in the meta-poems; it even engenders its own graceful strain in a poem like this, 1326:

Before the sun rises,  
streets in Philly have  
this sheen, different  
than at midnight, as  
the nascent day holds  
back its presence, but  
makes itself felt in air  
like breathable crystal—  
no one can tell me  
I'm not living my  
life to the full.

This was written in early December 2009, and soon published in *The Argotist Online*. It is also worth noting that this is not the kind of poem I could have written, even in recollection mode, about

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*Cheltenham*, or in the *Cheltenham Elegies*. There is a dynamism in the Philly streets, even for the duration of wolf hour, which, however menacing, is inverted by sleeping Cheltenham into absolute, moribund stasis. In fact, I use the urban in *Apparition Poems*, specifically Philadelphia, as a metaphor for different forms and manners of dynamism, and even if the dynamism has a hinge to confrontations with mortality and conflict in general, it still generates the kinds of sparks (sexualized or not) which make it more attractive and more graceful than the desolate banality of the suburbs. That Philadelphia is an exciting landscape for me, and for different *Apparition Poems* protagonists, also differentiates it from Baudelaire's Paris, where damnation is the price to be paid for enjoyment, and the fact of the urban landscape as a "game" cannot diminish the ennui of human consciousness which has not made peace with individuality or processes of individuation.

The *Apparition Poems* protagonists in Philly are not, strictly speaking, flaneurs; they almost always have a definite objective in doing what they do, or looking at what they are looking at, and move through these texts with a sense of conviction. The Philadelphia game of interlocking circuits is being played in pursuit of victory, of triumph; and the prize for triumph is to reprise the dominant theme of the epic text— that behind every singular reality there are multiple meanings, and singularity must always dissipate into multiple channels, whether what is being dissevered is inside the mind realities from outside the mind realities, concupiscence from fertility, or a relationship with language from language subsisting as a reality in its own space. It just so happens that this dissevering process, both the phenomenological spark in my consciousness and its textual counterpart, was born into being with greater facility in totalized, 3 am darkness than in broad Philadelphia daylight, and from this singularity you may derive any multiple significations you wish; including how to interpret the suburban echoes which later issued from it.

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### Apparition Poems : Dialogue with Wordsworth

Over the course of my studies, graduate and undergraduate, there are few texts I got closer to than William Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. At best, it is one of the choicest exegesis texts ever written around the disclosure of what motivates, sustains, and inhabits major high art consonant poetry; at worst, it is a confusing mess. Wordsworth makes clear his allegiance to the rural poor, and to channeling their voices (which he calls "the real language of men") in his poetry; he has established this choice, he says, to represent the plain, emphatic language used by the rural poor, uninfluenced by social vanity, hinged always to the beautiful, permanent, durable forms of nature and the natural world. Wordsworth also wants to explore cognition, the manner in which emotions, once excited, cause the mind to associate ideas. The dialogue I would like to initiate here has to do with *Apparition Poem 1488*, which has already proven to have, among the Apps, a unique, compelling magnetism. I think I have found out why— it is because there is a "heart" to the poem, a center, which is plain, emphatic, uninfluenced by the vanity (and it is in some senses a social one) towards heightened diction, syntax, and thematic thrust. While 1488 is not written in a rural dialect, it catches its protagonist in a state of excitement, associating ideas in such a way that the plain, emphatic "heart" of the poem is sandwiched by the wonted heightened aesthetic terrain of the Apparition Poems series. That the heart has permanence and durability owing to its emphatic plainness is arguable:

liquor store, linoleum  
floor, wine she chose  
was always deep red,  
dark, bitter aftertaste,  
unlike her bare torso,  
which has in it  
all that ever was  
of drunkenness—  
to miss someone terribly,  
to both still be in love, as  
she severs things because

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she thinks she must—  
exquisite torture, it's  
a different bare torso,  
(my own) that's incarnadine—

By the heart, I mean “to miss someone terribly,/ to both still be in love, as/ she severs things because/ she thinks she must,” and it is, as I said, readily comprehensible on the surface, with (uniquely, in the context of this book) few multiple significations and no twists or torques towards multiplicity— one woman, one man, one relationship. That 1488 should inhabit a more typical, specialized Apparition Poems space, move into direct earnestness, and then move back into specialized multiplicity again— when Wordsworth discusses the real language of men, he never establishes how he would choose to approach, on a theoretical level, a Lyrical Ballad which had inhering this kind of gear-shift, or for the real language of men to develop an imagination (in one poem) and then shift back into plainness. The effect, in 1488, is to make it so that a reader, who might have limited tolerance for the multiplicity levels in other Apparition Poems, would find a kind of safe haven in the four pertinent lines, a textual oasis which makes palatable, and imaginatively feasible, the rest of the poem. It is also relevant to me that the substitution of Eros (broadly speaking) for what William Wordsworth perceives in nature is one the Apparition Poems go out of their way to make— the beauty, durability, permanence, and the “real” are all to be found in the erotic, and that the richness inhering in text-represented eroticism need not fall beneath what Wordsworth sees in (for instance) Tintern Abbey. Where the Wordsworthian text sits between Man and Nature, how the text can guide men to a fuller understanding of the life we have all been born into on Earth, is another quandary which the Preface only half addresses, especially because the average reader is not guaranteed to be smitten with natural forms. Eroticism is different— because Wordsworth claims that the poet supersedes other writers for singing a song which everyone can join in with, and because the erotic is of interest, permanently and durably (and plainly and emphatically), to almost everyone, it would seem that nature and eroticism should be at least commensurably ranked. As to the special magnetism, already manifest, of 1488, it has to do (as has already been written about at some length) not only with eroticism but intoxication— and the most important intoxicating effect 1488 manifests, is the move from the heightened to the plain and back again.

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### Apparition Poems : Walking the Square

A tentative structure I've divined around *Apparition Poems* has to do with what seem to be the four most salient themes of the book: the city, the night, sex, and art. The city is usually Philadelphia; New York, Montreal, LA, and Washington also put in appearances. So much of the book was written in the middle of the night, and so many poems are set roughly in "wolf's hour" dimensions, that the night itself, its vicissitudes, has to be a major motif. Sex I've discussed as involving a protagonist, who is very successful sexually with women but also frequently heartbroken and therefore emotionally vulnerable. Under the aegis of "the art," I include the meta-poems, character monologues, and the poems which address philosophy and academia. So, that's how, when you configure the four motifs together, I allow myself to call *Apparition Poems* an American epic, and an epic in fragments. No book is all-inconclusive, where human realities are concerned; but *Apparition Poems* takes a vested interest in covering as much narrative-thematic ground as possible. Divining also, for an Apparition Poem which brings all motifs, the entire motif square together, I stumbled upon 1341:

Secrets whispered behind us  
have a cheapness to bind us  
to liquors, but may blind us  
to possibilities of what deep  
secrets are lost in pursuit of  
an ultimate drunkenness that  
reflects off surfaces like dead  
fishes at the bottom of filthy  
rivers— what goes up most is  
just the imperviousness gained  
by walking down streets, tipsy,  
which I did as I said this to her,  
over the Schuylkill, two fishes.

The first eight lines could be oracular, or just drunken babble— I prefer to think of them as a little bit of both. Intimations and insinuations of gossip soon give way to intimations and insinuations of

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murder, corpses, carnage— death, in fact, hovers over the poem and its two protagonists, as does the night and the city. The Schuylkill is filthy; and, as the protagonists cross the Walnut Street Bridge, drunk, perhaps in the middle of the night, they have to make peace both with their own mortality and with what, both inside their minds and outside their minds, is filthy beyond repair. As to whether this Lothario is as impervious as he thinks— the thoughts of death, of “ultimate drunkenness,” suggest that he is not. What sex is there is not revealed; and if the connection to art has to do with the end-rhymes and other poetic devices which configure the formal structure of the poem, it roots 1341 in a history which reaches back from Philadelphia to London and Paris, as is the case in similar textual circumstances ten years later.

I read 1341, and how it ends, as a fragment or apparition documenting the pleasures both of intoxication and of psychic dissolutions into larger realities, both inside and outside the mind. It is also worth noting that the eight lines of “drunken babble” may be answering one of his companion’s questions, maybe about gossip, maybe about death, or about both— she may bother to ask him if he has any secrets, if he is hiding anything important from her, or if there is anything sinister in his past. Does his answer suggest that he’s a bullshit artist? Maybe.

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### Dealing with phenomenology in the Cheltenham Elegies

The process of critical comparison in literature reveals and adumbrates, over a long expanse of time, that in the interstices between works of literary art, of perhaps equal value, a system of compensations binds and fastens comparison and chiasmus. When positing the Cheltenham Elegies in relation to Keats' Odal Cycle, and bearing in mind the preponderant strength and subtlety of Keats' prosody, I would like to suggest this compensatory chiasmus for the Elegies— just as Keats' prosody not only vivifies the Odes but justifies the entire Odal endeavor, the Cheltenham Elegies are vivified and justified by the exquisite tensions and dramatic intimacies between the specific characters who populate them. Keats' Odes, it must be iterated, are populated by no specific person other than the Odal protagonist— the intimacy between this protagonist and Art and Nature must suffice. The intimacies thus explored are Platonic intimacies. As human drama must compensate for metrical sublimity in the Elegies, what should be sublime in them are the intricate complexities (scaffolding again) between the characters, and the sense of crescendo/decrecendo inhering in the miniaturized dramas which unfold and coalesce from line to line, and from (as certain characters are carried over) from Elegy to Elegy. The precise substitution is humanism for formalism— and heightened psychological acuity for heightened diction. Poets and critics are free to decide, in their own systems of compensation, which counts for more, within the context of poetry, rather than in drama, philosophy, or literary criticism itself.

The phenomenological aspect of the Odes— what, as textually represented, is outside of Keats' mind and what remains locked inside— is matched, in the Elegies, by a sense or panoply of multiplications around the myriad characters who inhabit them— that phenomenological inquiry, when applied to more than one represented psyche, especially applied in a simultaneous fashion, manifests its own bewildering complexity, and must be approached (on a critical level) with a certain amount of caution and restraint. Thus, I will not yet venture towards the sorts of appraisals I have already visited upon the Odal Cycle— I will only assert that the Elegiac protagonist (so to speak), in making (in each Elegy) a series of textual, narrative-thematic bifurcations (as in, with every introduced character we see manifested another cognitive interior and exterior), creates and orchestrates a circumscribed textual universe or cosmic egg, in which phenomenological matter changes form, ascends or descends, without ever altering the basic imperative drives of an individual, individuated human psyche, as a

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smaller egg contained and encompassed within the larger cosmic one. If prosody, commensurate with Keats', is not there to lend grace and beauty to the production, what is? To paraphrase Grecian Urn, the beauty of the Elegies is all in their truthfulness— that by channeling the deepest possible levels of human intimacy, we see, on this humanistic level, the human race revealed in totem, in a way or manner impossible in the Odes, whose prosody still signifies everything but human intimacy and interrelation. As the work on various Elegies begins, the delicate, tentative work of unraveling the phenomenological systems in the texts will gradually emerge from this early amorphousness.



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### Mannerism and Apparition Poems

In positing critical boundaries between *Apparition Poems* and *Cheltenham*: *Apparition Poems* has in place something Mannerist, or “Manneristic,” which differentiates it from *Cheltenham* and the *Cheltenham Elegies*. It has to do with sex, and sexuality; the sense that one *Apparition Poems* protagonist is exaggeratedly sexual, and traipses from sexual encounter to sexual encounter, always with women, always with a kind of Byronic angst about the strife, confusion, agony and ecstasy he encounters in the process. The pitfalls of this textual Mannerism are much the same as the pitfalls of pictorial Mannerism: by focusing on exaggeration, the distending of literal and metaphoric limbs, the reality or Realism component of the text is diminished, and with it the sense of humanistic interest. That is why, for all their iciness, dinginess, and phenomenological turmoil, the *Elegies* have a hinge (for me) of being rated superior to the original *Apparition Poems*.

It also needs to be said that *Apparition Poems* is a book with many facets: the meta-poems, dramatic monologues, and character sketches (including a few persona poems), all present a far less Mannerist, or “mannered” textual picture, so that the epic in fragments can continue to enumerate its turf as just that. I also want to iterate that the chiasmus between the Mannerist, sexualized poems and the meta-poems, dramatic monologues, and character sketches objectifies this protagonist as he intermittently appears in the text, highlighting both his raw-nerved sensuality, its phenomenological import, and its limitations, as different audiences will construe these limitations to be drastic or not, depending on attitudes towards the Mannerist. Some sensibilities dote on exaggeration, some do not.

Another chiasmus: between the Byronic version of *Apparition Poems* protagonist and Byron’s two alter egos, Childe Harold and Don Juan: reveals how and where we have seen these phallogentric energies in English language poetry before. In fact, the said Apps protagonist is a sort of composite sketch of Childe Harold and Don Juan conflated. Childe Harold’s exaggerated world-weariness is mixed with Don Juan’s exaggerated libidinous innocence, and set into motion in twenty-first century Philadelphia. If we could call Byron a Mannerist, it is because he plays on his audience’s expectations that he is willing to exaggerate circumstances and contexts in his poetry towards outrageous ends; and if Don Juan and Childe Harold do not seem particularly outrageous in 2015, it may be because even Byron’s outrageousness was carefully crafted not to antagonize the substantial public which had already gravitated to his work. It is also interesting to wonder if an *Apparition Poem* like this, 535:

I was fucking this girl  
in the ass, late at night,  
and I looked out into  
the parking lot across  
the street and moon-  
light glistened on the  
cars, I thought, that's  
it, I don't give a shit  
anymore, you can take  
your America, shove  
it up your ass just like  
I'm doing here, that's  
when I came, and it  
was a good long one.

will seem outrageous in 2215, or even if it seems outrageous now; living, as we do, in porn-besotted times, where (in porn) couples fornicate in Mannerist modes and formations, exaggerating what physical intercourse is and means against the normative. Byron wrote against the Regency England backdrop of coyness and artful evasion; yet, he manages to convey a sort of randy insouciance in his treatment of the Don Juan protagonist. In a way, it doesn't matter; even those who don't enjoy the Byronic level of Apparition Poems will see how it fits in like a puzzle piece towards a representation of both a Zeitgeist and a national psyche; even if, as I have suggested, the Cheltenham Elegies perform roughly the same job with more authority and with superior, laser-like focus.

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# ART RECESS 2

## POETRY AND MORE

### Phenomenology: Cheltenham Elegies

To introduce the inquiry into phenomenology and phenomenological interest in the Cheltenham Elegies, I would like to include, in its totality, Apparition Poem #414, which is placed early in the 2012 Blazevox print book Cheltenham:

And out of this nexus, O sacred  
scribe, came absolutely no one.  
I don't know what you expected  
to find here. This warm, safe,  
comforting suburb has a smother  
button by which souls are unraveled.  
Who would know better than you?  
Even if you're only in the back of  
your mind asphyxiating. He looked  
out the window— cars dashed by  
on Limekiln Pike. What is it, he said,  
are you dead or do you think you're Shakespeare?

The chiasmus and comparison with Keats' Odes: the preponderant weight, in the Elegies, of humanism over formalism and drama over prosody establishes that the Elegiac Protagonist consolidate an identity over and against the identity of the Odal Protagonist. The "I" here is social, and brings his phenomenological biases and concerns into a social context. In 414, the Elegiac Protagonist is confronted with an Antagonist who sets into motion his own phenomenological interest or gambit. As per this phenomenological movement— the Antagonist in 414 maintains the conceit that he has made cognitive boundaries dissolve and has entered, and is speaking from within, the Elegiac Protagonist's mind ("Who would know better than you?/ Even if you're only in the back of/ your mind asphyxiating"). His conceits are thus multiple— first, that such a cognitive break-in is possible— that, by a phenomenological movement, one human mind can break into and inhabit another with authority — second, that the Antagonist has successfully jumped into and inhabited the mind of the Elegiac

Protagonist— third, that he has not only broken into but (Zen) mastered this mind. He is magically in possession not only of his mind, but of someone else's.

In 414, tensions and ambiguities around this phenomenological confrontation are left open and unresolved— to what extent the Antagonist has (Zen) mastered the Protagonist's mind is not addressed. The truth, were it aired, might be quantifiable— as in, his mind is 50% mastered, or 60 or 70— but we are left to surmise these calculations for ourselves. It is also important to remember that this attempted cognitive break-in works as a metaphor for Cheltenham itself, both as an external, physical reality and as, on a phenomenological level, a mindscape for the Protagonist. The phenomenological reality of Cheltenham, for individuals, is that it is a dystopia of hostile aggression and violence, but also (conversely) of the mind's enchantment with darkness, deterioration, and decay. The included concrete detail, of cars dashing by on Limekiln Pike, fulfills a specific function in the Elegy— it breaks the phenomenological tension (whether the Antagonist speaks from within the Protagonist's mind or not), and enumerates how an enclosed circuit (mind to mind) has been broken by an impersonal, outside the mind reality (cars, Limekiln Pike), demonstrating as well the obdurate hardness of outside the mind realities (the drabness of cars and of Limekiln Pike), and that the Antagonist now (rightly or wrongly) feels himself moved back into his own mind. Important with Keats: his outside the mind realities are almost always beautiful, conventionally enchanting ones (forests, mountains, birds, trees, etc). Outside the mind realities in the Cheltenham Elegies tend to be cold, hard, eerie, or even repulsive ones; but redeemed by superior truthfulness as regards humanity and the human condition. Back to 414: once the attempted cognitive break-in ends, and the phenomenological tension (mind against mind) disperses, a sense of discretion is restored to the vignette. That the final interrogative iteration more or less concedes non-mastery is significant— and once again, because the answer to the question is left unspoken, the ambiguities and tensions of phenomenological combat (who is more inside the other's head) are left intact, alongside other levels inhering in the poem, such as its clustered approach to melopoeia.

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### Phenomenology : Cheltenham Elegies (2)

In Elegy 261, there is a preponderant weight affixed to outside the mind realities (initially), and the imposition of outside the mind realities on the interior terrain of innocent kids:

Never one to cut corners about cutting  
corners, you spun the Subaru into a rough  
U-turn right in the middle of Old York Road  
at midnight, scaring the shit out of this self-  
declared “artist.” The issue, as ever, was  
nothing particular to celebrate. We could  
only connect nothing with nothing in our  
private suburban waste land. Here’s where  
the fun starts— I got out, motherfucker.  
I made it. I say “I,” and it works. But Old  
York Road at midnight is still what it is.  
I still have to live there the same way you do.

In an American suburb like Cheltenham, the landscape is mostly occupied by nothingness places— homogenized, generic strip malls and thoroughfares, along with neighborhood after neighborhood of undistinguished homes, parks, and schools. It is an outside the mind reality of entrenched nothing and nothingness— places which not only mean nothing to anyone, but which were specifically designed and manufactured to mean nothing to anyone— hostile places for kids with brains and imagination. Old York Road is the archetypal suburban pivot point— supporting commerce, facilitating different forms of traffic, but generic enough to guarantee that cognitive-affective attachment to Old York Road is extremely unlikely for those who use it. Connecting nothing with nothing, in 261, manifests the process by which the human mind, surrounded by nothing and nothingness outside the mind realities (soulless realities), internalizes nothingness also as an interior reality; having, under the weight of perpetual imposition, no choice but to do so. Once the nothingness of the suburban landscape is internalized, the mind’s affective and imaginative capacities grow numb, and subsist in a state of dormant torpor. When the hero/anti-hero of 261 pulls his rough u-turn in Old York Road, it is both to demonstrate rebellion against internalized nothingness and to (by risking death) express

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complicity with it. It is an ambiguous gesture, which also encompasses expression of an internal landscape incompletely homogenized with Cheltenham's outside the mind tactility.

This is why, ultimately, 261 is a poem about, and Elegy for, brotherhood— neither character is so absorbed and assimilated into nothingness (Cheltenham) that a sense of humanity is lost, and the drama of the poem inheres of watching the Elegiac Protagonist connect (as an inversion) the “something” of bold-if-foolhardy rebellion against nothingness with the something of his own artistic triumph. Whether the hero/anti-hero has established an “I” which “works” we cannot determine. What we see, by the end of the twelfth line, is both triumphant and tragic— it is inferred that nothingness, when internalized at a young age, is impossible to completely eradicate in human consciousness— thus, the Elegiac Protagonist still lives, on an internal cognitive-affective level, in a space vulnerable to the inferred plague. Over the course of the Elegy, we watch as Old York Road begins outside the mind and makes a phenomenological transition inside, moves from physical to metaphysical textual subsistence— and signifies identical nothingness realities in both realms. Likewise, between the two friends, the drama is initiated in physical reality and dissolves into a metaphysical or phenomenological drama between two interiors— who has managed to expel, and thus transcend, the most nothingness, and who has manifested more presence in the world. It's the Platonic equivalent of a scenario which recurs in later editions of Equations. The Fancy-equivalent in this Elegy (to lasso in Keats' terminology) is this phenomenological dissolution from outside the mind into the mind's interior (a confrontation, rather than a break-in as in 414), from the physical into the metaphysical (especially as regards Old York Road, what it is), and the felt truthfulness of this dissolution, even if (as in 414), we complete the Elegy surrounded by unresolved tensions and ambiguities (never learning the current “location,” inside or outside, of the hero/anti-hero), and the omnipresence of the banal.

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### Phenomenology : Cheltenham Elegies (3)

In Cheltenham Elegy 412, what surfaces is the phenomenological reality of ghosts (apparitions or phantom presences), and the unsettling sense that they can reside either inside or outside the mind, be attached to persons or places, and (possibly) inhabit multiple entities at once:

Each thinks the other a lonesome reprobate.  
That's what I guess when I see the picture.  
It's Elkins Park Square on a cold spring night;  
they're almost sitting on their hands. One  
went up, as they say, one went down, but  
you'll never hear a word of this in Cheltenham.  
They can't gloat anymore, so they make an  
art of obfuscation. That's why I seldom go  
back. Elkins Park Square is scary at night.  
There are ghosts by the ice skating rink.

The first hinge to our discourse, and chiasmus to/with Keats' Odes, is 412's partial resemblance to *Grecian Urn*— that, in the Elegy, the Elegiac Protagonist is presented with an inanimate object (a photograph) which contains a representation of human life. A photograph, like Keats' Grecian Urn, is an objective, outside the mind reality— and what we get, in contrast to Keats' enchanted forest, is the dinginess and haunted decay of Elkins Park Square, further made lurid by the assumed coldness of the temperature when the photograph was taken. The phenomenological leap is made by the Elegiac Protagonist into the photograph— he attempts to inhabit the minds of both represented figures (who are ghostly in their physical absence from the Elegy itself), and conjectures, from the phenomenological “break-in,” that both accuse the other of both isolation and lawlessness. Meanwhile, Keats' leap into the mind of the “fair youth” reveals only ease, comfort, and engaged sensuality— a sense of timelessness within sensuality as well. If the “fair youth” is a phantom ghost/phantom presence, he is redeemed by the vainglorious conceit of inclusion within the parameters of art and major high art consonance; first, by those who built the urn; second, by Keats' memorializing of the urn in a later era. The two antagonists in the Elkins Park Square photograph are

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redeemed by nothing; we learn that one has managed to find a place in the world against the other, but the details of the situation are caught and clipped by “coldness” and amorphousness. The Elegiac Protagonist demonstrably has back-knowledge of the situation between the antagonists, and is on intimate terms with their strife (while Keats’ intimacy with his “fair youth” is suspect); but the photograph freezes for eternity the essential mystery of a beleaguered situation (why the Protagonist must “guess”), and the situation and the mystery themselves become ghosts, as does Elkins Park Square and Cheltenham itself, as a phenomenological, as well as a physical, reality.

As we continue to interrogate 412, the mysteries, and the ghosts hewn into the mysteries, multiply—who is it that the Elegiac Protagonist is talking to, who is showing him this picture and demanding a reaction? Is it an Antagonist, as in 414, a competitive brother, as in 261, or some other combination of sensibilities and motives? The sense that the Protagonist is surrounded on all sides by phantom presences is difficult not to discern— whether in the photograph, showing him the photograph, or “ghosting” the entire scenario by having created the context out of which all these relationships and situations could have unfolded. Because the Elegiac Protagonist is beleaguered by ghosts on all sides, and the phenomenological tension of their presence, of whether they exist objectively or only within his own consciousness, it is easy to imagine why the Elegy ends with an apostrophe to the kind of nothingness Cheltenham place which generates phantom presences and apparitions— again, the fulsome, lurid banality of Elkins Park Square, and the ice skating rink which does, in fact, sit on one of its borders. What makes 412 a well-rounded experience, within all this empty space, is that all the situations and interrelationships are rendered with intensity, and with a certain intimate insight into the consciousness of the Elegiac Protagonist. Oddly enough, unlike 261 and 414, 412 ends with an outside the mind, tactile derivative image— the ice skating rink near Elkins Park Square— which can serve as a metaphor towards understanding the coldness (iciness) of apparitional life, the way it stays on the surface of things, forces interiority to objectify itself, gives concrete form to cognitive-affective desolation and abandonment. That ghosts are a phenomenological reality, objectively existing both encased in and free from human consciousness, seems to be not only a subtext but an overt theme; and the elegiac nature of the poem incises that a haunted realm like Cheltenham not only generates ghosts out of its fraudulence, pettiness, and cruelty, but makes it so that once Cheltenham is an inside the mind reality, ghosts and apparitional presences must accompany and animate it, especially at night.

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# ART RECESS 2

## POETRY AND MORE

### Apparition Poems: Apologia (two-part preface '13-'22)

Though no sustained narrative buoys it up, Apparition Poems is meant to be sprawling, and epic. An American epic, even one legitimate on world levels, could only be one made up of disparate, seemingly irreconcilable parts— such a state of affairs being America's, too. The strains which chafe and collide in Apparition Poems are discrete— love poems, carnal poems, meta-poems, philosophical poems, etc. Forced to cohabitate, they make a clang and a roar together (or, as Whitman would have it, a “barbaric yawp”) which creates a permanent (for the duration of the epic) sense of dislocation, disorientation, and discomfort. This is enhanced by the nuances of individual poems, which are often shaped in the dialect of multiple meanings and insinuation. Almost every linguistic sign in Apparition Poems is bifurcated; either by the context of its relationship to other linguistic signs in the poems, or by its relationship to the epic whole of the book itself. If Apparition Poems is an epic, it is an epic of language; the combative adventure of multiple meanings, shifting contexts and perspectives, and the ultimate despair of the incommensurability of artful utterance with practical life in an era of material and spiritual decline. It is significant that the poems are numbered rather than named; it emphasizes the fragmentary (or apparitional) nature of each, its place in a kind of mosaic, rather than a series of wholes welded together by chance or arbitrary willfulness (as is de rigueur for poetry texts).

This is the dichotomy of Apparition Poems— epics, in the classical sense, are meant to represent continuous, cohesive action— narrative continuity is essential. Apparition Poems is an epic in fragments— every poem drops us, in medias res, into a new narrative. If I choose to call Apparition Poems an epic, not in the classical (or Miltonic) sense but in a newfangled, American mode (which nonetheless maintains some classical conventions), it is because the fragments together create a magnitude of scope which can comfortably be called epic. The action represented in the poems ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the heroic to the anti-heroic; there are dramatic monologues set amidst the other forms, so that the book never strays too far from direct and directly represented humanism and humanistic endeavor. The American character is peevish if not able to compete— so are the characters here. Life degenerates into a contest and a quest for victory, even in peaceful or solitary contexts. Yet, if the indigenous landscape is strange and surrealistic, it is difficult to maintain straightforward competitive attitudes— consciousness has to adjust while competing, creating a quandary away from the brazen singularity which has defined successful, militaristic America in the world.

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Mad Pursuits  
When You Bit...  
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John Keats and "Mad  
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Portrait: Abby  
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Suddenly, American consciousness is beleaguered by shifting sands and multiple meanings— an inability, not only to be singular but to perceive singular meanings. Even as multiplications are resisted, everything multiplies, and often into profit loss, rather than profit gain. The epic, fragmentary narrative of Apparition Poems is a down-bound, tragic one, rather than a story of valor or heroism. The consolation for loss of material consonance is a more realistic vision of the world and of human life— as a site of/for dynamism, rather than stasis, of/for multiplicity, rather than singularity. Apparition Poems is a vista into “multiple America” from Philadelphia, its birth-place, and a city beleaguered also by multiple visions of itself. No city in America has so much historical heft; nor did any American city suffer so harsh a demotion in the brutally materialistic twentieth century. Yet, as Apparition Poems suggests, if a new America is to manifest in the twenty-first century, it might as well begin in Philadelphia. If the epic focuses on loss followed by more loss, rather than eventual, fulsome triumph, then so be it. And if Apparition Poems as fragmentary epic imposes a lesson, it is this— the pursuit of singularity in human life is a fool’s game; the truth is almost always, and triumphantly, multiple.

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With twelve years hindsight, and with a sense of affection for the text, combined with an acknowledgement that I am partly being arch, it seems to me that Apparition Poems has established itself as a *less-than-wholesome* book. The sense, in the text, of both perversity and perversion in a generalized sense, creating textual angles meant to cut or incise rather than (as is more usual in America) to caress, make an approach to this text after all these years what could, possibly, be considered superfluous. The problem with an abrupt dismissal, and it is a *less-than-wholesome* problem, is the recourse the book has to philosophy and philosophical thought, still within the bounds of the aestheticized, as a reaching or attempted journey beyond perversion, or into perversion transcendentalized again into allegory, loaded metaphor, and formal reinvention. Once poetry here has attempted intercourse with the higher frequencies of discursive thought, we deduce that an interrogation is necessary as to whether this intercourse is possible, in a real way, at all. To answer this query, it must first also be interrogated, even into more open air than we might like, what intercourse is possible between poetry and philosophy; further investigating, when we understand what the possibilities are, whether this form or manner or intercourse is desirable or not.

The apparition which haunts the book: a sense of depth and solidity, held within an individual consciousness; a sense of wholesomeness; leads the protagonist beyond the landscape of the carnal, and of jejune inquiries into language, which fall short of achieving more intellectually than stylization or stylized modes of disjuncture and deconstruction. The only oxygen which reaches him, which can propel the shards of a decimated consciousness into at least an *imagination* of wholesomeness, is that supplied by a desperate surrender to discourses aimed higher than aestheticized language is designed to reach, and at the conditions and terms the aesthetic generally offer. The image arises of a Don Quixote figure, pacing the streets of Center City Philadelphia in the middle of the night. In the state of perversity, perversion, and the less-than-wholesome within which the book was written; a trance of sorts; it never occurred to the author that a reliance on the aesthetic, and on stylization in general, could give way to limpidity if control was relinquished into those more limpid discursive spaces.

Rather, bifurcating the philosophical so that it could also fulfill the terms of the aesthetic, and of stylization, seemed a viable tactic towards giving vent to that sense of the fragmented, the jagged, the incisively sharp, which animated his consciousness.

Philosophy, and philosophical discourse, aims, at its highest pitch, for the most objective kind of truth. Language becomes a conduit for vistas opened, meant to answer questions that cannot be answered by the quantifications of scientists— the being of beings, the precise nature of human consciousness itself. The poet's aim is more about a sophisticated form of entertainment— language as a conduit for the pursuit of sumptuousness, imagination strained to make things, or things-of-the-world, transitive to other things (metaphor), along with a lower, compromised version of objectivity, functioning in harmonious balance with imperatives to imagination and *melopoeia*. The real intercourse possible between philosophy and poetry is thus a borrowing, by poetry, of a more objective lens with which to view poetry's traditional objects— eros, affectivity, metaphoric creativity. What philosophy can take back, in its turn, is a something intermittently useful to the philosopher and his discourses— a sense enjoyment or playfulness in a lower mode of discourse— waters warmer, if less ultimately nourishing, to splash around in.

The assignation of desirability or not desirability to this congeries of circumstances manifests a sense of ambiguity, which can only be answered by individuals forced to confront it. If I continue to affix my own assignation of *less-than-wholesome* to Apparition Poems, it is because the point at which philosophy appears in the book has a hinge to a less-than-traditional poetry aesthetic, which substitutes rancor, discord, and semantic/syntactic explosiveness, in several directions, for sumptuousness, and metaphors constructed and perpetuated in a textual Theater of Cruelty, to borrow from Artaud, all of which push against the bounds of what might be considered entertaining, for poetry's conventional pursuits. What entertainment could then be derived from Apparition Poems, would be the emergence of philosophy, as an objective antidote to a subjectivity jaundiced by immersion in a jungle of overly sharp, hostile metaphors— thus alienated from the wholesomeness of the conventionally aesthetic.

As an individual, confronting a text, it may be acknowledged or unacknowledged that Apparition Poems creates new waters for higher discourses to play around in— play, here, being a function of metaphors-as-toys, aesthetic landscapes as stomping grounds, idiosyncratic syndromes as vehicles of possible universalization. The book, in other words, cannot cure itself, make itself wholesome— though, through its sense of reaching for philosophy, it tries— but philosophy itself, engaging in a mode of investigation here (ransacking the Theater of Cruelty for points of interest) can do for the book, what the book cannot do for itself. If all these things happen amidst an ambience of mischief, of willing transgression, so much the better.

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# ART RECESS 2

## POETRY AND MORE

### Kierkegaard and Dry Ice: Apparition Poem #1613

The complex relationship between Inter-Dialogism and philosophy cannot be simply or succinctly enumerated. When consciousness leaps into other consciousness, the basic questions of phenomenology remain the same— what is inside our consciousness, what is outside, what is held or bounded in or by consciousness, and what is not— only issues of individuation, difference, and distinction manifest to lead any inquiry into any number of both theoretical and semantic quagmires. When philosophical issues are addressed in serious poetry, the potential and actual arabesques out into cognitive space become innumerable, especially when Inter-Dialogism is used in a new capacity. What happens when, as often happens in philosophy, allegorical figures are employed? From Socrates to Zarathustra to Abraham, philosophical texts must lean on symbolic representations of individuals, to delineate the essences of philosophical dilemmas and interests. Abraham, we know, was Kierkegaard's major choice in his most pivotal text— Fear and Trembling— and he, as an author, asks us, as an implicit “you” in an I-thou relationship, to attempt to leap into Abraham's consciousness when the Lord asks him to climb the mountain and sacrifice his son, seemingly for no reason, and testing Abraham's faith, sharpening his faculties of perception. Apparition Poem 1613 subsists as both an interpretive vista onto Kierkegaard and a tangential representation of an implicit “I” who has been able, it would seem, to achieve the requisite Inter-Dialogic leap into Abraham's consciousness, though we know Abraham to only be a figure in an allegory, rather than a partner in any intimacy:

Follow Abraham up the hill:  
to the extent that the hill is  
constituted already by kinds  
of knives, to what extent can  
a man go up a hill, shepherd  
a son to be sacrificed, to be  
worthy before an almighty  
power that may or may not  
have had conscious intentions

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where hills, knives, sons were  
concerned, but how, as I watch  
this, can I not feel that Abraham,  
by braving knives, does not need  
the one he holds in his rapt hands?

What the implicit I sees in 1613 is a kind of loop around unconscious processes of governance— that God himself may rule the Universe from a center of consciousness or not, and that the subtle mental strength Abraham gains from contact with this Universe Force unconsciously begins to direct his thoughts and actions, which take on consonance with being sharp, incisive, knife-like. The final loop, we see, is that, in a binding chain, the “I” in the poem becomes sharp, incisive, and knife-like from Inter-Dialogic interaction with Abraham (and it is implicit by this time that Inter-Dialogic interactions may happen with characters in allegories and their unseen creators, as well as flesh and blood people), who has inherited his incisiveness from the Universe Force whose consciousness or unconsciousness cannot be gauged or mastered. If the dry ice rule applies here, as it does for most of Apparition Poems, it is because all philosophy, as heavy as it is on intellect and allegory, is touched by dry ice, and I-you queries ride shot-gun to the objectivism which must drive the enterprise forward and turn the proverbial steering wheel. Is some real I-thou intimacy mixed in? To answer this brings us to a philosophical critical crux which is very strange— strange, in 1613, because the protagonist seems to be (mystically, uncannily) attempting an Inter-Dialogic leap into our brain, as he (unconsciously) sees what he sees, and steps back out again, leaving a sense behind that philosophical awareness can be governed by unconscious processes and impersonal forces all the way through, just as many of the most salient Big Questions, both for science and philosophy, are impersonal ones, and can only be conjectured at in an impersonal, if not unconscious, manner. The implied “you” in 1613 is rather rare, and demanded by a literary context; a merely philosophical context would stay in the third person; but, in attempting a bridge and a chiasmus between philosophy and literature, and, as is also the case in 1617, aids the reader in feeling a sense of humanity amidst all the objectivism and dry ice. Yet, the contradiction inheres that in addressing the Big Questions on any profound level, it is almost always individual consciousness which is able to produce breakthroughs in science and philosophy, cloaked in the impersonality and objectivity (governed, also, often unconscious processes) of the third person. If poetry is able to enter this game seriously, the first person singular must re-make itself as explicit, and personal, to give whatever construct is at hand the insignia of the aesthetic (including poetry's imperative-to-song), and allow the reader graceful entrance.





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## POETRY AND MORE

### Dry Ice

The “dry ice” approach to serious poetry— I-it employed over I-thou— forms an interesting chiasmus with what I call Inter-Dialogism. When you want to jump over the hurdle of ordinary consciousness into the consciousness of another, however briefly, and if the Other in question is set at a natural distance from you, as can happen in many contexts, the result can be insight or a mystified sense of helplessness. Think how this works in terms of worldly power— militaries, judicial systems, governments— and how individuals who fall under the aegis of these conglomerate interests are forced to make their points and gather their information. If you meet another personage, with the insignias of worldly power on them, one way or another, your attempt to make the Inter-Dialogic leap may or may not be hampered by timidity, reserve, prudence, intimidation, coercion, or a sense of being toppled by protocols. Often, if the Inter-Dialogic leap is to be made and the insight gleaned (leading to whatever further action the situation or context demands), it must happen quickly, once the powerful party has somehow been shocked into revealing themselves. Worldly power, as relates to the individual consciousness of those who bear it, can create a brain white-washed by its own armature of complexities and protocols, which make it so that, when both partners in a conversation have vested worldly interests, Inter-Dialogism is beleaguered by the dry ice of no intimacy whatsoever, and often, no brain symmetry (interchange of nations). Everything remains resolutely impersonal, even as, as everything created by the human brain, political armature must show cracks and strains, and those skilled at noticing those cracks and strains can make an Inter-Dialogic leap towards figuring out another consciousness. This all manifests in Apparition Poem 1345, from Apparition Poems:

Two hedgerows with a little path  
between— to walk in the path like  
some do, as if no other viable route  
exists, to make Gods of hedgerows  
that make your life tiny, is a sin of  
some significance in a world where

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hedgerows can be approached from  
any side— I said this to a man who  
bore seeds to an open space, and he  
nodded to someone else and whistled  
an old waltz to himself in annoyance.

The situation appears severe— the protagonist of the poem is spinning out an allegory for someone we assume to be a government or military functionary. The purport of the allegory is the idea that when the human race plans to move forward, forcing individuals to worship forces that degrade, abase, and trivialize their lives, this usually, and needlessly, disrupts human progress. As to why the Inter-Dialogic needs of the protagonist swerved him towards employing this allegory— the functionary's reaction would have to reveal, one way or another, at least a part of his brains, and thus make the situation more comprehensible to the protagonist. Thus, the whole Inter-Dialogic interchange has to happen without there being any personal emotion involved at all. Inter-Dialogic reactions dry iced this way, without any personal emotion, when represented in text, are a taste some may have more than others, just as the first, dry iced set of Apparition Poems may be preferable to some over the more personal Cheltenham Elegies. Here, what is set forth is a situation in which the functionary's reaction — annoyance— leaves in enough ambiguity that the reader must decide for him or herself if a real Inter-Dialogic leap has been made or if the protagonist misjudged his adversary. He has attempted to initiate a battle of mystification— a sense that boundaries are being crossed, so that who is mystifying who becomes an open question. This reality is, as I said, political more than personal, just as the Elegies have politics built into them only on secondary levels. Why dry ice in serious poetry is interesting as an aesthetic effect is that most sensitive temperaments understand that the dry ice effect has its own aesthetic grandeur, just as Shelley's snow and ice storms in Mont Blanc are strangely, eerily gorgeous. As for 1345, the poem ends with the situation seemingly power-blocked; allegory told, allegory rejected; and yet we know that in politics, responses can germinate over long periods of time. Thus, the battle of mystification works for the reader too, who will be unable to predict either the precise context of this battle (no precise playing field, like Cheltenham) or how it may turn out in the end. The entire edifice is on ice, thus subject to decay, deterioration, and erosion.

